



## PROQUEST USE CASE

# Using ProQuest History Vault in the Undergraduate Research Seminar

**KENNETH JANKEN**, professor of African American and Diaspora Studies at University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, recently assigned the civil rights content in ProQuest History Vault to his undergraduate research seminar course in African American Studies. We asked Professor Janken several questions about his experience using History Vault in this course.



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### **How did you first learn about History Vault?**

I discovered History Vault by accident sometime after 2011. In 2003, I published *White: The Biography of Walter White, Mr. NAACP*, much of the research for which was based on the microfilm edition of the NAACP Papers housed at the Library of Congress. Those reels were subsequently digitized by ProQuest. I forget the exact circumstances, but I was searching my institution's library catalog for the finding aid for the microfilm edition and was flabbergasted to discover that this indispensable collection was now available online in ProQuest History Vault. In my career, some of the most satisfying research nuggets have appeared serendipitously – becoming aware of History Vault has been one of them.

### **Have you used History Vault in your own research?**

For my biography of Walter White, I relied heavily on the microfilm edition of the NAACP Papers. Because nearby Duke University's library had the entire microfilm collection, I was able to do the necessary research without having either to make short, frequent trips to the Library of Congress (which would have been an expensive and time-consuming proposition) or constantly borrowing a few reels at a time from other institutions' libraries. Having the NAACP Papers nearby accelerated the research by three to four years. Because the NAACP Papers appear in History Vault in the same way as they do on microfilm, I am certain that had History Vault been available in the mid-1990s, it, too, would have sped the pace of research.

My current research project is a biography of Cedric Belfrage (1904–1990), a British expatriate journalist living in the U.S. who was an important figure in the development of an international response to the threats of fascism and war in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s and a progressive, left-wing opposition to the Cold War from the late 1940s through the 1980s. His work as a film critic, newspaper editor, reporter, and advocate for African American civil rights, organized labor, and anti-colonial activities in the United States, Britain and Latin America mark him as an influential thinker on the Left both in decades where those

movements seemed to be ascendant and where they were on the defensive. His extensive ties and abiding friendships with leftists around the world point to a style of political organizing that is under-investigated: that causes are advanced not only by articulation of ideas but also by building trust and intimacy among and within circles of like-minded persons. While a significant portion of the primary sources are available in physical archives only, Belfrage's connections were such that he also appears in the collections of other individuals and organizations, including those encompassed by History Vault, including the Robert F. Williams Papers and the Claude A. Barnett Papers.

### **Describe the class for which you assigned History Vault?**

At UNC, the Department of African, African American, and Diaspora Studies is a multi-disciplinary unit. I am one of several faculty members who teach the undergraduate research seminar, which is required for the major and in which the enrollment is overwhelmingly comprised of majors. Like my colleagues who teach this course, I teach it from my disciplinary home, which is the historical method. When I teach the course, I design it around the completion of a semester-long paper, 20–25 pages in length and based principally on primary sources. Students learn the different phases of research, including how to identify a research problem, where to locate basic reference material, how to read broadly in the secondary literature, how to locate archival sources and read them critically, how to take notes on archival material, how to cite sources, how to write persuasively, how to listen and then act on critical responses from me and from their peers, how to give critical responses to others in a constructive and supportive fashion – and I'm sure I'm omitting some other steps. Along the way, students submitted discrete parts of their project for reviewing and grading – a research statement, a preliminary bibliography, an outline, a rough draft – that helped them on to the next task. At the beginning of the semester, students almost universally express doubt that they can research and write such a paper. One of my goals is to demystify the research process and to introduce them to historians' habits of mind and thought.

## Did you give students a specific assignment to complete using History Vault?

I want students to become comfortable looking through large collections of primary sources and to be attuned to ways in which the documents recorded and expressed information and ideas. Early in the semester, I ask seminar members to use the NAACP Papers in History Vault to locate and download the complete folder that contains the minutes of the meeting of the NAACP board of directors that took place on November 10, 1919. They then answer some questions:

- What do the minutes of this meeting tell you about lynching, racist violence, and the NAACP's fight against them?
- What do the minutes of this meeting say about other aspects of the NAACP's work and/or organization building?
- If you wanted to search all the NAACP board of directors' minutes for references to the organization's Secretary James Weldon Johnson or the organization's Assistant Secretary Walter F. White (who later became the secretary), what search terms could you use, and what search terms would not yield many results?
- Download a different folder of meeting minutes from 1920–1930 and review another meeting or two; how do the minutes compare in structure, content, and otherwise?
- What value might these documents have for research on lynching or peonage or legal fights?
- Browse the A–Z list of collections in History Vault and identify a collection you might use to research lynching, peonage, or legal fights in the years between 1917 and 1960.

The discussion of these questions alerted students to the idea that in historical research there is rarely a sole document that “proves” a research topic and that researchers have to sift mounds of evidence, assess their value and build an argument. This insight was reinforced throughout the semester as seminar members identified archival collections relevant to their topics, made presentations in class about documents they considered especially striking, and then answered questions from other members of the seminar, including me. Regular class exercises

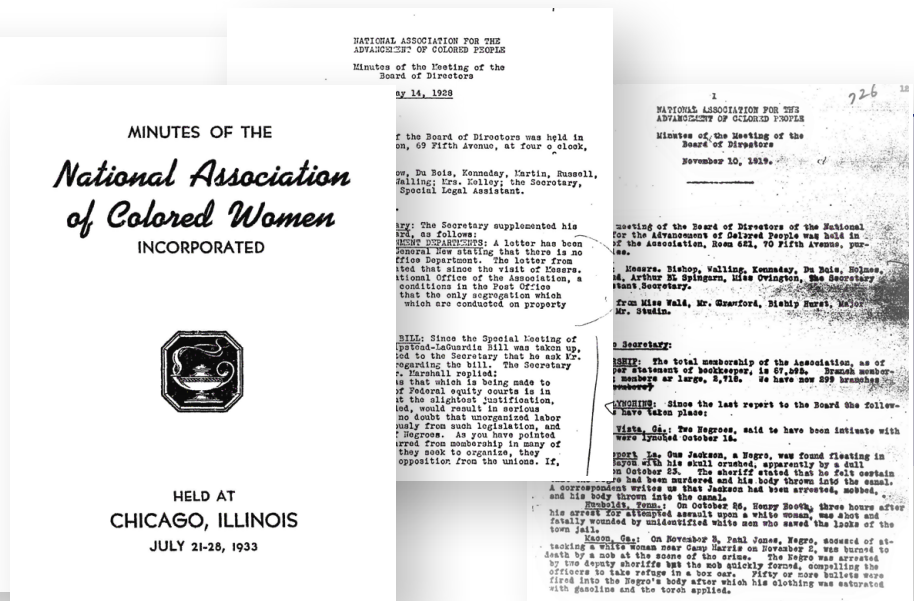
grew in complexity as students became more adept at working their way through large collections and making decisions about what was relevant to their research.

## For the research paper, what topics did students choose to write about and what collections did they use?

The NAACP Papers figured prominently in many seminar papers. One student wrote about the Anti-Lynching Crusaders; another researched the salary equalization struggles pursued in the 1930s by teachers in Maryland. A third researched the campaigns to open the Hollywood film industry to African Americans during the Cold War. A fourth student researched the Depression-era debate within the NAACP over whether to orient the organization toward working-class struggles; this paper also drew considerably on the A. Phillip Randolph Papers and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters collection. A fifth student who researched the origins of African American social work, utilized the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs Papers and the Library of Congress's Mary Church Terrell Papers. Other students used manuscript collections subscribed to by UNC Libraries that were not in History Vault.

## How would you assess your students' use of History Vault?

The best papers utilized materials from more than one module and more than one folder. (The corollary in the analog world is the superior paper that is deeply researched versus one that relies on a single dictionary entry or a single letter or other document to make very large claims.) The ability to search across collections by keyword is a time-saver for sure, and that benefitted some students. For other students, the search engine simply pointed them to the first result returned. It seemed to me that this is little different from asking students to pour through boxes of material using a finding aid: good researchers will look at all of the instances they gather from the finding aid, while researchers who are less sure of themselves or less persistent will stop at the first instance. The exercises and assignments mentioned earlier helped to remind students that they should comb through an entire folder for which a result was returned and not stop with the result itself.



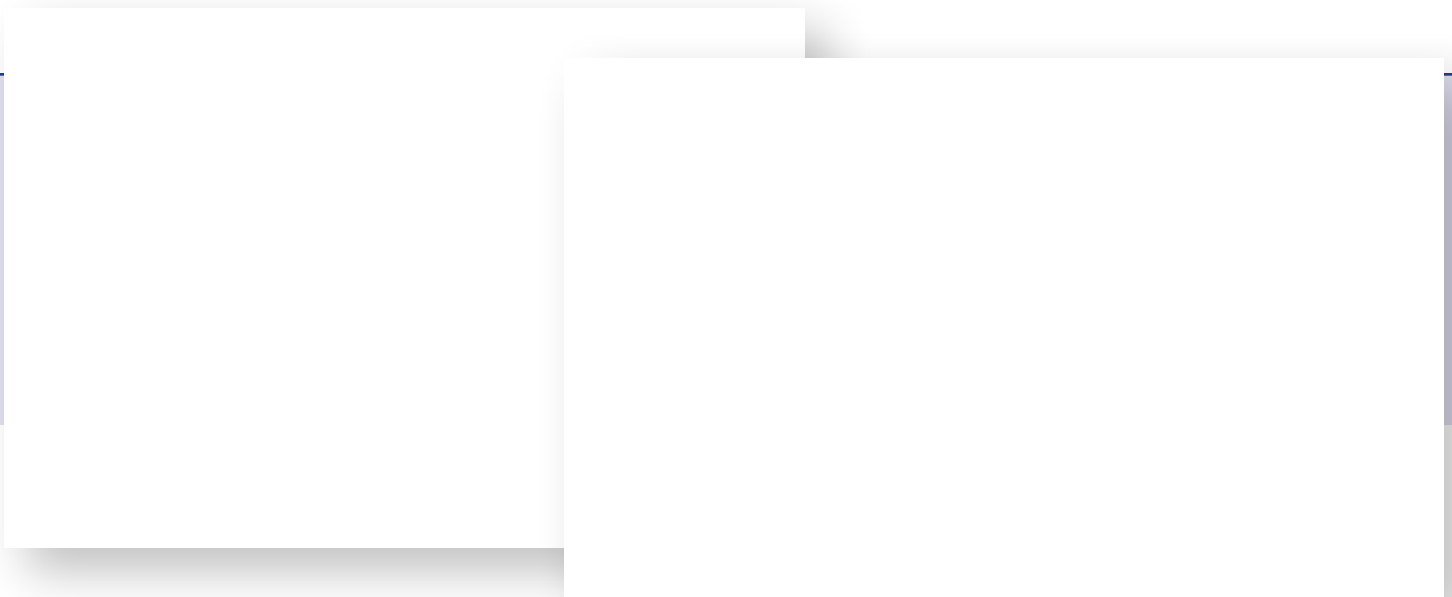
## In the future, how would you help students to make better use of databases like History Vault?

Used to the exclusion of other tools, the keyword search encourages tunnel vision. Regular reminders to combine use of either the basic or advanced search functions (making sure to use appropriate search terms, as, for example, "African American" will not return results in the NAACP papers for the years before 1990) with browsing adjacent folders will encourage a historian's curiosity. So, too, will direct questions to student-researchers, such as, "Besides the document you have at hand, what other types of evidence do you think you need?" or "What other documents were in the folder you downloaded?" or "Did other documents contradict this one or give different perspectives?" If there is a way to mitigate tunnel vision with a database feature, I don't know what it is but would welcome its appearance. I would also encourage students to use the collection descriptions. From the collection descriptions,

students can browse through the collection in the same order that the documents appear in the physical archive. Having this arrangement in History Vault is great for introducing students to the concept of context in archival research and it allows them to easily see the adjacent folders and related materials.

## Would you encourage other professors to assign History Vault in their classes?

Yes. I think it is especially useful for courses with a significant component of primary research. Several students were able to successfully research their topic using History Vault and to produce high quality work. I will incorporate History Vault into the mix of primary sources the next time I teach the research seminar course. It was most useful under any circumstances – and indispensable in conditions that did not allow for in-person visits to archives.



*Kenneth R. Janen is professor of African American and diaspora studies at UNC – Chapel Hill, where he teaches courses on the history of the Civil Rights Movement, the Harlem Renaissance, and class, race, and inequality in America, among other topics. He is the author of three books: Rayford W. Logan and the Dilemma of the African American Intellectual (University of Massachusetts Press, 1993); White: The Biography of Walter White, Mr. NAACP (The New Press, 2003); and The Wilmington Ten: Violence, Injustice, and the Rise of Black Politics in the 1970s (UNC Press, 2015).*

Cover photos: Upper Left: A. Philip Randolph, founder and president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters from 1925–1968. Lower Left: Walter White, Executive Secretary of the NAACP from 1929–1955. Right: Mary Church Terrell, founding member and president of the National Association of Colored Women, 1896–1901, and founding member of the NAACP.

Photos from the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.



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